

Mining's toxic legacy for the people of Dannhauser

Profit extracted leaving behind poverty and polluted land and water

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A VERY sensitive matter has surfaced in Dannhauser, KwaZulu-Natal, which is a small coal mining town in northern part of the province.

The town has endured close to a century of coal mining and has had several environmental injustice cases that have haunted the communities in major ways, from the apartheid past to our democratic present.

Mining has brought sadness and poverty to the people of the area. Apartheid's forceful relocations and grave extractions without proper rituals and compensation to the families concerned, were the practices of the past remain in the present. Abandoned and unrehabilitated mines are scattered around our lands. Once the coal – and corporate profit – has been extracted, the people have been abandoned and left to live with polluted lands and water.

One such mine is the Durnacol Mine that closed 24 years ago, but the community remains with a discarded heap of mine waste that blows across neighbourhoods and pollutes the area that people rely on for life.

The state of the Durnacol community has been low-balled – abandoned – by the Amajuba District and Dannhauser Municipality, and nothing has been done to challenge the Department of Mineral and Resources and Energy to come on board and do something about the hazardous state of the abandoned mine.

As we fight the expansion of mining activity in our communities, we urge people to see the extraction sector as an enemy. We have seen recent mining rights proposals increasing in the very same region that has been struck by this mining catastrophe in the past and present. Peoples' health is compromised on many levels.

Of great concern is the government's community health-care hospi-



tal in Dannhauser, just 2km from the Durnacol abandoned mine.

The Department of Health should provide hospitals that make people well, not ill. They should be places of healing, not illness. This government facility, which started its operations in 2015, now poses a huge threat to workers and the community that it is servicing.

Workers talk of seeing cracks in the walls of this building widening day by day, and they now fear for their safety. The sad part is that this infrastructure is only five years old and cost R90 million to build, on shaky ground that was previously heavily mined. The facility is now a threat to the community and employees of the Department of Health.

The reason the building is in this state is because this was an old mining site, and the walls are cracking as the land subsides after mining. The Durnacol shaft number two was right where the hospital is now built. Sadly, some members of the community are not aware or suspicious, as this matter has been treated with the utmost secrecy – the public has no information or report on the situation.

There is a clear lack of democracy and closure of public spaces to get this information. We need an open democracy that allows informed questioning of the decision-makers and policymakers who continue to grant mining rights in the area. The authori-

ties completely fail to acknowledge the sad reality that mining exposes society to, which is poor health and polluted lands, etc.

Thus people are challenging what is happening and workers are joining in supporting these challenges. The call for no mining in our communities is becoming a broad call.

This case is a textbook example of environmental injustice and the deadly costs that result from mining activity. These experiences also increase the sensitivity of the community to resist such "development", bearing in mind the aftermath.

I have been fortunate to be referred to the system manager of the hospital about the state of this building – he is fully aware of it.

The Department of Health is also downplaying this issue: the hospital being built on a mining area and the fact that this puts people's lives at huge and unnecessary risk. I hope that the struggle to improve the hospital is related to our struggle to challenge the ongoing mining of coal in the area.

The links must be considered and understood in the context of our campaign to keep the coal in the ground.

It's abundantly clear that the government prioritises mining companies and their activities at the expense of the wellness and safety of people.

The destruction of the environment by mining and its impact on people's lives have long been brought

to the attention of the government, but always fall on deaf ears. In 2015, various national portfolio committee representatives were invited by groundWork to visit the Highveld to witness for themselves coal-affected communities in the area and hear from communities around the country about the impact of coal mining on their lives.

Only a few portfolio committee members turned up, and very little has been done to date.

In 2017, groundWork again helped the coal-affected communities visit the national Parliament to convey the same message to the various portfolio committees, hoping that the attendance of the committees would improve. However, there was even lower attendance and less action.

In 2018, in Newcastle, groundWork also helped affected communities develop memorandums to hand to Gwede Mantashe (Minister of Mineral Resources and Energy) in both the KZN Mining Indaba and Mining Charter consultation event.

They called on the minister to take action against the Ikwezi coal mine that had forcefully relocated people and dug up their graves without proper consultation. The minister failed to respond to the memorandums, the mine is still operating and nothing has been resolved.

The government doesn't care about people when it comes to mining; it only cares about mining and profit-making under the guise of development. If it is development, why are people left to suffer at the expense of this development? Who is this development for?

We need a development plan for South Africa, not an extractives plan.

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